



A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture

Edited by

Rebecca M. Brown and
Deborah S. Hutton

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A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture

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We hope that the volume itself speaks to the generosity of spirit we have experienced in meeting and working with colleagues who study Asian visual culture in a wide range of fields. We are very grateful to be working in such a supportive and active community of scholars.

A final note: to make the volume widely accessible, transliterations and romanizations of the many languages used in this book are written without diacriticals.

Part I



Introduction



Revisiting “Asian Art”

Rebecca M. Brown and
Deborah S. Hutton

The Impossibility of Asian Art

In 399 CE, the Chinese Buddhist monk Faxian (c. 337–422) left the city of Chang’an (present-day Xian), to embark on an epic, 14-year pilgrimage. His travels took him first overland through Western China and Central Asia, across the northern portion of the Indian subcontinent to the Bay of Bengal, then by sea south to Sri Lanka, and eventually back to China via the islands of Indonesia.¹ Approximately two years after returning home Faxian published an account of his travels entitled *A Record of Buddhist Countries*. This text, one of the first such Buddhist travelers’ accounts and replete with careful descriptions of what Faxian saw, was influential at the time and remains important today to scholars and students of Asian studies. Art historians find in Faxian’s text rich descriptions of the centrality and power of objects within Buddhist rituals in all the locations he visited. He describes an image procession he witnessed in the Central Asian oasis city of Khotan (today in China) for which monks constructed a cart “more than thirty cubits high, which looked like the great hall (of a monastery) moving along.” At Khotan’s royal palace, the king

put off his crown of state, changed his dress for a fresh suit, and with bare feet, carrying in his hands flowers and incense, and with two rows of attending followers, went out at the gate to meet the image; and, with his head and face (bowed to the ground), he did homage at its feet.²

In a similar manner, Faxian records the importance of a seated statue of the Buddha at a monastery (*vihara*) in Sri Lanka that “the monks and commonalty reverence and look up to without ever becoming wearied.”³

Faxian's travels to Buddhist sites in southern Asia, his translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese, and his detailed descriptions of Buddhist practices place him at a particularly important historical moment for scholars of Asian art. As himself a scholar, not of art but of Buddhist culture, Faxian, like contemporary scholars, travels to important sites, gathers information about the visual images, the architecture, the local rituals, and reports on these things to his peers through explanation, presentation, and interpretation of texts and images. Because Faxian's reach was so great, and because Buddhism shapes many of the cultures and periods of Asian art, scholars of Asian art, regardless of their specialty, will at some point encounter Faxian's text in their research or teaching. And the ubiquity of image use across geographical areas of Asia evidenced in his writings – the fact that a fifth-century traveler from Xian was able to ascribe a similar import to images from the deserts of Central Asia and the island of Sri Lanka – suggests a shared visual culture that we today might study, following in Faxian's footsteps.

Yet if, on the surface, Faxian's travels and resulting textual observations suggest a unity – a shared experience – within Asian material culture, in that same text, he dispels any such idea. After describing the beauty and “solemn dignity” of a particular Sri Lankan jade statue of the Buddha, Faxian goes on to write (referring to himself in the third person):

Several years had now elapsed since Fa-Hsien [Faxian] left the land of Han [China]; the men with whom he had been in intercourse had all been of regions strange to him; his eyes had not rested on an old and familiar hill or river, plant or tree; his fellow-travellers, moreover, had been separated from him, some by death, and others flowing off in different directions; no face or shadow was now with him but his own, and a constant sadness was in his heart. Suddenly (one day), when by the side of this image of jade, he saw a merchant presenting as his offering a fan of white silk; and the tears of sorrow involuntarily filled his eyes and fell down.⁴

The places and people that Faxian encountered during his many years of travel were foreign to him, strange, and it was the sight of an object (the silk fan) so unmistakably Chinese that finally brought the homesick traveler to tears. If Buddhism links aspects of Asian culture together, then, bringing “Asia” together through Buddhism simultaneously reveals and produces crucial differences across the region. Thus, while all students of Buddhist art – whether third-century BCE north India, eleventh-century Japan, or fourteenth-century Myanmar – have to know the shared tenets of Buddhism (and even have to know Faxian's text itself), they also must acknowledge the diversity of culture which Faxian experiences on his travels. And if that diversity is evident even against a backdrop of the so-called “internationalism” of Buddhist art,⁵ then it is perhaps more emphatically so for the many other types of art – religious and secular – produced over millennia in the large and varied geographical zone classified as “Asia.”

Indeed, the geographical and temporal scope of Asian art far outstrips that found in other traditional segments of art history, most of which have boundaries

spanning a handful of countries and a handful of centuries at most. Asian art, by contrast, covers 30 percent of the Earth's landmass and 60 percent of the world's population, and investigates the history of this vast region over the course of the past five millennia. Like African art or the art of the Americas, Asian art is an unwieldy, sprawling object.

The very idea of "Asia" as a unified land or singular culture arises not from any physical or material reality, but rather from political, cultural, and economic relations of power, in order to sustain an idea of a unified Europe.⁶ As Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen explain, "of all the so-called continents, Asia is not only the largest but also the most fantastically diversified, a vast region whose only commonalities – whether human or physical – are so general as to be trivial."⁷ Even when the definition is narrowed from the "continent" of Asia (the Mediterranean to the Pacific) to the Asia of popular imagination and practice (South, Southeast, and East Asia) this "vast and heterogeneous swath of terrain from Afghanistan to Japan . . . still lacks the unifying features that are expected to characterize a human-geographical region."⁸ The scholars conclude that Asia is "little more than a flattering mirror to Europe, conceptualized more by its supposed lack of Europeanness than by any positive attributes of its own."⁹ In their study of world geography, they go on to show how Asia and the correlate concepts of "the Orient" and "the East" shift over time, but always remain defined in relation to Europe, "the Occident," and "the West."¹⁰

The boundaries of Asia and Asian art have shifted over the past century, always in negotiation with prevailing power relations, and often with strong undercurrents of the Orientalist production of Asia just beneath the surface. During the early twentieth century, "Asian art" referred almost exclusively to pre-modern works from India, China, and Japan, but within that framework included a wide variety of media, from swords to textiles. These artworks were valued for their aesthetic beauty, expert craftsmanship, reverence for tradition, and spirituality – qualities seen as lost or lacking in contemporary industrialized Euro-America. Art historian Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908) extolled the beauty of Japanese art, while his colleague Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) highlighted the sophisticated spirituality of Indian art, even explicitly comparing it to medieval European art to demonstrate its legitimacy.¹¹ These combined efforts legitimized Asian art: artworks that decades earlier had been ignored, unknown, or, in the case of Hindu imagery, debased as "monstrous," within Europe and North America, now were seen as fine art worthy of study.¹²

In Asia, colonialism and rising nationalism in both India and Japan brought the art historian Okakura Tenshin (or Kakuzo, 1862–1913), and the artist-poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) together in Calcutta in 1902 to counter the primacy of the West with the idea of pan-Asianism.¹³ While Tenshin was motivated by the nationalism of late Meiji period Japan, and Tagore by Bengal's *swadeshi* movement (an anti-colonial campaign to favor Indian-made goods), both men saw Asia's spirituality as a strength in contrast to the West's materialism.¹⁴ Yet, this loose attempt to unify Asian art and politics ultimately participated in the

Orientalist production of “Asia,” defining Asian art by what European art lacked, thus confirming Asia’s difference from Europe and enabling it to serve merely as a reminder of Europe’s superiority.

As a result of the early focus on the spiritual and the ancient in Asian art, temporal and geographic areas of study have long depended on what enabled a proper mirror for Europe or what supported a constructed vision of Asia. Some areas of study, like Chinese painting, fit nicely into a Hegelian understanding of progress and history, or easily fell into formalist analysis in parallel with European painting and connoisseurship studies. Others, like the sculptural program of the Hindu temple, compared nicely with Gothic cathedrals, and could fit into Coomaraswamy’s rhetoric linking medieval spirituality across geographical and temporal boundaries. Buddhism, seen within textual studies as a legitimate, philosophical religious tradition with an easily identifiable singular figurehead, also drew the attentions of art historians and collectors, aided perhaps by the Gandharan region’s aesthetic affinities with ancient Greek and Roman sculptural traditions.

After World War II, the collection and study of Asian art intensified, particularly in North America, but also within Europe and parts of Asia as well. “Asian art” gathered more objects, sites, and information under its broad umbrella, but at least initially the discipline remained fairly conservative, focusing on the ancient and the spiritual, and arguing for the legitimacy of the discipline by asserting that Asian art indeed had a history. Exemplifying this conservatism is Sherman E. Lee’s (1918–2008) *A History of Far Eastern Art*, one of the major textbooks used in survey courses of Asian art history from the time of its original publication in 1964 through the release of its fifth edition in 1994.¹⁵ The book’s title pulls in several directions. First, it asserts that Asia has a history, a claim that mid-century art historians would wish to make against those who located history and development solely within Europe. Second, the title doubly distances the material in this book from that of the West: not just Eastern art, but Far Eastern, a term that echoes the romantic visions of the exotic East. In doing so, the title itself can be understood to reinforce the Orientalist underpinnings of Asian art, even as it argues for the existence of history outside of Europe. Finally, the book’s presumptive comprehensiveness reinforces the unity of Asia and the possibility that it could be encapsulated in one text. (The current volume’s title also falls into many of these problems. We discuss this directly below.)

The comprehensiveness and unity presumed in Lee’s title could not, of course, be delivered in the book. Its lacunae provide a cross-section of Asian art’s own gaps in the middle of the twentieth century, and demonstrate what needed to be left out in order for a coherent, singular narrative to emerge. Excluded from the book are any modern or contemporary works, any Korean art except gold-work and ceramics, and most Islamic, Jewish, and Christian art from the continent, despite long traditions of art production from these religious communities in Asia. Aside from a single example of Islamic art, the Southeast Asian material focuses almost entirely on medieval Buddhist and Hindu works.¹⁶ Lee

includes five pages on Mughal painting, but no examples of Mughal architecture (not even the Taj Mahal). These exclusions present Asian art as a unified field, with a focus on traditional, carefully crafted, spiritually endowed objects (privileging "Eastern religions" such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, and Daoism), utterly distinct from Euro-American artistic traditions. These lacunae also enable a singular narrative as Asian art develops consistently from Stone and Bronze Age cultures of the region, through the spread and "international influence" of Buddhist art, to the rise of national styles in India, Indonesia, China, and Japan, each one peaking at various points in time (but all pre-1850) before finally slipping into "ossification."¹⁷ The point is not that Lee's work deserves to be singled out for criticism – to the contrary, the longevity of the book's printing serves as a testament to the text's success as an important document for the study of Asian art – but rather that it exemplifies the Orientalist underpinnings of Asian art history into the late twentieth century.

While Lee's text itself might be said to represent an ossification of Asian art history, its publication coincided with new directions of study within the field, often in concert with the political exigencies of the post-war period. The 1950s and 1960s saw a growing popular and scholarly interest in more esoteric elements of "Eastern religions" such as Zen, Tantra, and goddess worship both within Asia and in the northern Atlantic,¹⁸ continuing the trend of emphasizing the spiritual in Asian art but expanding the types of art investigated under that rubric. Funding for the study of Asian art came from multiple sources, whether collectors, diaspora communities, or governments seeking to understand a region of the world where they might have political or economic interests. As a result, wars, while certainly destroying much cultural heritage, have often spurred interest in regions of Asia: the Japanese occupation of Korea produced a number of archaeological and art historical experts in both Korea and Japan; the US occupation of Japan supported the early inquiries of Japanese and American art historians and collectors; more recent US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have given rise to government funding and a greater interest in the art and antiquities of these regions in university departments and among scholars of all disciplines.¹⁹ The political impetus for the study of some areas of Asian art over others continues to shape the field, just as colonial concerns and anti-colonial activism earlier articulated the central questions and objects for Asian art.

In the past few decades, with so-called globalization and rising attention to multiculturalism, as well as the flourishing of contemporary art from Asia at auction houses and galleries, the definition of Asian art has vastly expanded to include the modern and contemporary periods and to encompass regions or types of art often overlooked in older approaches to the continent. Starting in the late 1980s, major scholarly publications began to address the art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Asia, moving away from earlier critiques that labeled this work as merely derivative and engaging instead in analyses that acknowledge the effects of the global colonial economic and cultural system during this period.²⁰ With several major exhibitions of contemporary Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian

art circulating in the 1990s and 2000s, the popularity of contemporary Asian art as well as the art of the Asian diaspora has spurred scholars to study the most recent centuries of Asian visual culture (see Machida and Mathur in this volume).²¹ Gradually scholars are filling in the temporal gaps, but the wealth of material on earlier periods still dwarfs that on these more recent eras.

Despite this expansion, Southeast Asia, Korea, the Himalayan regions, Mongolia and Manchuria, Central Asia and the Afghan cultural region still receive less scholarly attention than the canonical regions of India, China, and Japan. Even within these “primary” countries, internal peripheries remain marginal: tribal and rural art forms, art produced by women, the visual culture of regional minorities, and those cultures for which materiality is less important. Segments of southern India, for example, remain largely excluded from the canonical narrative that is centered on the northern regions of the subcontinent. Tibet and Nepal remain caught between India and China; Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia remain secondary, with their art often seen as derivative of China or India. Gradually these regions have gained more scholarly attention, and as they do, they reshape the fabric of Asian art in productive ways.

With the rise of interdisciplinary conversations within academia, historians of Asian art have adopted a broad range of methodologies, borrowing from the fields of anthropology, geography, literature, cultural studies, gender studies, and postcolonial studies, to explore an ever-increasing range of visual culture, whether south Indian textiles in Thailand, mosques in western China, Portuguese baroque churches in the Indian state of Goa, nineteenth-century photographs from Japan, or contemporary installation art by Vietnamese American artists. This methodological expansion drives the study of many geographical areas not traditionally included in Asian art’s canon, but even more crucially promises to shift the underpinnings of Asian art in fundamental ways.

The growing scope of Asian art is invigorating for the field, producing rich scholarship, and giving voice to underrepresented cultures. It also aids us in negotiating Asian art’s Orientalist foundations. Each new addition to the field undermines its unity. It is now abundantly clear that no central, coherent narrative can incorporate all of Asian art, nor can we maintain a crisp distinction between the mutually dependent and asymmetrically constructed categories of Asian art and Western art. We also recognize the ways in which new methodological approaches and new additions to the objects discussed within the rubric of Asian art necessitate fundamental changes in the way Asian art is pursued. We cannot merely add objects into the mix as if that would make it whole; we must accept the challenge to rethink the foundations of the discipline rather than presume we can just keep adding on.

Yet, if we recognize that Asian art developed as a particular construction within the history of art, that the immense regional scope rests upon long histories of othering, producing a region unified only in that it helps to shore up a similarly constructed, united “West,” why, then, persist with Asian art? Why not replace